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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the various types of school-business partnerships that exist in rural America. Data were derived from an extensive review of literature and limited field observations and interviews. Findings indicate that little formal research has been conducted on reform-model, school-business partnerships. Two strands of thought regarding the organizational and personal interactions between schools and businesses are identified--the partnership domain and the relationship domain. The partnership domain is characterized by a static process, a well-defined organizational structure, a focus on organizational needs, insulation from self-evaluation, a defined power base, one-way benefits, and status-consciousness. The relationship domain has the following traits: a dynamic process, an organizational structure based on interpersonal relationships, a focus on meeting individual needs, self-examination, multiple power bases and benefits, and a task orientation. (LMI)

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MOVING BEYOND SCHOOL-BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS AND CREATING RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

This paper describes the many types of school-business partnerships that exist in rural America. It presents the available research and documentation on numerous businesses and schools currently involved in some type of partnership. The findings reveal a number of interesting factors inherent in partnerships and offer a new model to be explored. The paper suggests that schools and businesses need to move beyond the typical partnerships that now exist and create what we have coined as "school-business relationships."

Purpose/Rationale

Schools are constantly being asked to explore creative ways to gain support for their efforts. A typical venue involves the establishment of some type of partnership with an interested business organization. These types of partnerships have gained a great deal of attention and praise, and we believe rightfully so. However, few researchers have studied the dynamics of these partnerships nor explored how they can be improved upon.

The necessity for schools to build partnerships with various community businesses is obvious. At a time of shrinking budgets for rural schools, there is an even greater need for them to look beyond typical funding sources and establish partnerships with business organizations. Therefore, it is essential for educators to understand the dynamics of such partnerships. Many schools have joined/established partnerships with businesses without an understanding of what they were all about. After an examination of many school-business partnerships, we suggest there are organizational and personal dynamics which need to be present for successful relationships between schools and business. The findings will be

useful for both policy makers and administrators as they venture forth to establish new means for generating resources from the business world.

The study began with three major objectives:

1. to examine current school-business partnerships in rural school districts;
2. to document practices that work and those which do not; and,
3. to develop a comprehensive model that can be used for rural schools and businesses to establish meaningful and productive partnerships.

Procedures

To meet these objectives, an extensive review of the literature was completed concentrating on currently established school-business partnerships. The data base consisted of documented practices, evaluation reports, field observations, and interviews of people in organizations participating in some form of partnership. The field observations and interviews were limited since the purpose of this study was to understand the theoretical constructs surrounding partnerships.

The field observations and interviews were used sparingly and therefore were used as only verification of the findings uncovered in the literature. The obvious sequel to this study would be to conduct in-depth interviews and field observations to gain a greater understanding of the dynamics we suggest are important to have in place if school-business partnerships are to be successful.

Findings

A search to find primary studies on school-business partnerships revealed that very little research has been reported in this area. Over the past five years, most partnerships themselves appear to have lacked formal evaluation designs (Otterbourg, 1990). Despite the paucity of formal investigations on these collaboratives, we found many articles which describe particular programs, articles which urge businesses to get involved,

and articles which deal with educational reform. Likewise, several handbooks and guides geared toward facilitating the formation of partnerships exist, such as the "Guide to Developing Educational Partnerships" published by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (US Department of Education).

In the 1980's, the government began to recognize the need to integrate school and business entities. In 1985, the Committee for Economic Development released *Investing in Our Children: Business and the Public Schools* (Doyle, 1993). In 1988, Congress enacted the Educational Partnerships Act with the objective of stimulating the creation of educational partnerships. It was hoped/assumed these newly formed partnerships would demonstrate their impact on educational reform.

It was not until after the US government issued its acrimonious report on public education, *A Nation at Risk,* that corporate America really began helping elementary and secondary schools. In fact, over 100,000 school-business partnerships were established between 1983 and 1990 (Dumaine, 1990). The thought of the economic consequences attributable to an inefficient educational system in part compelled businesses to become involved in schools. In the past, most businesses avoided getting involved in decisions which impacted curricula and educational systems. Partnerships took the form of one-way relationships (e.g., Adopt-a-School programs). But of late, corporate America has taken the initiative on school reform issues. In 1989, a group called the Business Roundtable initiated a 10-year commitment to work towards state-level systemic changes.

The Business Roundtable, a group that represents the chief executive officers of over 200 of the nation's largest companies, issued a report in 1992 entitled, *The Essential Components of a Successful Education System:*

Putting Policy Into Practice. In it, they stress and give examples of B.R.T.'s nine components of a successful education system. Those nine principles are: higher expectations for students, performance-based education, better assessment strategies, rewards for successful schools and penalties for failing ones, school-based management, better staff development, high-quality pre-kindergarten programs, better health and social services in schools, and greater use of technology (Business Roundtable, 1992).

While the Department of Education estimated the existence of over 140,000 school-business partnerships nationwide in 1989 (Rigden, 1991), there is little evidence of resulting fundamental changes in the ways teachers teach and students learn. Indeed, one study of 133 schools in one of America's 50 largest school systems found that only eight of 450 local school-business partnerships had led to instructional change (Miron & Wimpelberg, 1989). Many partnerships achieve worthwhile objectives, but many also fail in their attempts to improve student learning. More attention must be paid to the micro-level interactions among participants in order to ensure successful school reform.

Two strands of thought emerged regarding the organizational and personal interactions between schools and businesses. We found a series of choices schools and businesses need to make when engaging in a partnership (Table 1).

Table 1
Choices that exist when establishing School-Business Partnerships

Partnership Domain	Relationship Domain
Static	Dynamic
Establishing Structure	Establishing Relationships among People
Concentrates on Organizational Needs	Concentrates on Individual Needs
Insulated from Self-Evaluation	Self-Examining
Defined Power Base	Multiple Power Bases
One-way Benefits	Multiple Benefits
Status-Conscious	Task-Oriented

Static vs. Dynamic

Overall, there appear to be two ways partnerships function. The first way is to be static, in which the partnership is one-dimensional and is driven by the structure of the organization. The second way partnerships can operate is through a dynamic process of interaction, which is characterized as multi-dimensional and designed to accommodate individual needs as well as organizational needs.

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In some partnerships, businesses act as in-house advisors and facilitate the setting of measurable goals and the identification of outcomes which focus on student learning (Rigden, 1991). The business partner in many successful collaboratives encouraged innovation in their partner schools (David, 1992; Rigden, 1991). This appears to be a natural role for businesses as they try to impress their corporate "sense of urgency" upon the educational enterprise. However, this is not done at the expense of the individual needs of the students or teachers.

Establishing Structure vs. Establishing Relationships among People

Most school-business partnerships are characterized by having a well-defined organizational structure in place. This is certainly not wrong unless the structure takes the place of person to person associations between school and business. Although structure is important because it creates a sense of stability, associations among individual participants must be established and encouraged if partnerships are to represent the needs of both organizations.

Some research-based companies, such as Apple Computer, frequently shared their own expertise with teachers, students, and administrators in scheduled collaborations. Apple staff visit each classroom many times throughout the year working directly with teachers (David, 1992). Such a procedure created a sense of ownership and "connectedness" to the project. People in both systems were valued because they were encouraged to work and share expertise with others.

Organizational Needs vs. Individual Needs

In the same light, we found many schools and businesses establish partnerships that respond to organizational needs at the expense of individual needs. In many instances, it is the organizational needs that bring together

schools and business; however, when the needs of people in the organizations are not recognized, individuality is lost.

In their study of 450 school-business ventures, Miron & Wimpelberg (1989) found that school personnel tended to deflate partnership programs when the project began to alter working norms and project coordinators remained ignorant to participants' reactions. This perceived ignorance places the cultural norms in jeopardy, which is typically the strength of the fabric that holds an organization together.

In the majority of successful partnerships reviewed, businesses, working in collaboration with school staffs, helped provide opportunities for training via finding, funding, and/or creating pertinent staff development programs. Effective reform-model partnerships realized that in order to affect teaching and learning, extra time and intensive professional training is required (David, 1992). Moreover, Levine (1988) reported that businesses realize the need for broadly, liberally educated teachers.

Insulated from Self-Evaluation vs. Self-Examining

An area which is rarely addressed in school-business partnerships is evaluation. Most partnerships are insulated from self-evaluation due to the fact that goals are not clearly articulated. The other interesting finding in this area was the fact that most partnerships did not see the need for evaluation. However, successful partnerships believe evaluation is not only important, but essential, if continual progress and growth is to occur. The belief is that a self-examining process will foster expedient adjustments when necessary.

Many ineffective partnerships either bear no assessment function or they possess one which tends to merely summarize (such as number of hours volunteers served, program monies spent, or descriptions of activities)

(Otterbourg, 1990). The need for formative assessment occurs in at least two dimensions: project outcomes and project effectiveness as they pertain to reform (Otterbourg, 1990; Rigden, 1991). Nonetheless, Otterbourg (1990) underscores the difficulty and complexity in evaluating these non-traditional programs. She also cites educators' resistance to evaluation, insufficient funding, time constraints, and apathy as additional hindrances.

In part due to self-examination, many effective school-business collaboratives have appointed full-time, independent, experienced advisors to help facilitate the program's operations for the long term (David, 1992; Farrar, 1988; Rigden, 1991). Businesses seemed to recognize their own lack of credible knowledge in certain areas and subsequently assigned teaching, learning, and organizational change consultants to fill this void.

Defined Power Base vs. Multiple Power Base

There is an obvious need to have some type of structure in place when establishing and maintaining a school-business partnership. However, when that structure is driven by a hierarchical structure, it was stagnating to the partnerships in terms of originality, participation, and individual ownership. Instead, partnerships that had multiple power bases (heterarchical) were more open to individual ideas and gave participants in the process a greater sense of ownership and responsibility.

A majority of the partnerships reviewed promoted some form of school-centered, participatory management (David, 1992; Farrar, 1988; Levine, 1988; Rigden, 1991). Businesses tended to encourage this type of leadership structure, probably due to the recent trend toward bottom-up management in the business environment.

In 1989 the Pacific Telesis Foundation established partnerships with several California schools. Their *Education for the Future Project* was

structured to elucidate and highlight the impact of school-site empowerment, accountability and parent involvement on enhanced student performance. The project endorsed both bottom-up and top-down management, but placed more emphasis on the former, especially as an antecedent to the latter. In an effort to spur creativity within school systems, the project was designed to create the context and provide the necessary resources to bring about meaningful change (Rigden, 1991).

In another example, the Panasonic Foundation has joined in educational partnerships to promote school-based, whole-school reform. Rigden reports on the issue of managing the relationship:

> The Panasonic Foundation has chosen to concentrate on building the capacity for change within individual schools and school districts by providing resources and supporting their efforts to restructure. It does not, therefore, establish a formal structure to manage its partnerships, nor does it suggest an organizational model for the schools. Instead, staff relate to partner schools and districts through several different types of consultantships, helping schools develop strategies to assess needs, create strategic plans, reorganize management procedures, encourage innovative teaching methods, increase parental involvement, and develop effective assessment tools (Rigden, 1991).

These "consultantships" encourage and cultivate individual relationships among participants.

One-way Benefits vs. Multiple Benefits

For partnerships to be successful they must benefit as many people as possible. We found many school-business partnerships as only benefiting one major group, namely education. It is considered essential that all businesses also benefit from the partnership. Multiple benefits usually occur when a forum for creativity is established and encouraged by individual participants rather than benefits being solely determined by the organizational structure of the partnerships.

The Boston Compact is a good example. It involved an agreement between the Boston School Department and a business coalition. The business faction promised to provide job opportunities to high school students and graduates while the district assured they would initiate programs that would enhance the teaching and learning in their schools. The first two years there existed evidence of reaching these two ends; however, the pursuit of separate agendas (coupled with a discontinuous membership)--while promoting multiple benefits--later compromised the success of the partnership. The business coalition exceeded its objectives, but the schools fell far short (Farrar, 1988). In this case, the Compact's structure (the agreement itself) confined the benefits to its pre-established goals. The Compact partnership was really more of an agreement/binding deal than a relationship.

Status-Conscious vs. Task-Oriented

Another distinction that was obvious between successful partnerships compared to inactive ones was their ability to be task-oriented. Many school-business partnerships were very "status-conscious." In other words, instead of energies being task-oriented to reach a shared goal, resources were used to establish and maintain the structure. Although this had public appeal, being "status-conscious" did little for the people invested in the purpose and goals of the partnership.

A second-year assessment of OERI-sponsored (Office of Educational Research and Improvement) partnerships revealed that each of the 29 federally funded projects had achieved some successes, and that some had "notable impacts." These effective partnerships showed evidence of designating time and resources to create and complete all planned activities. Ultimately, evaluators found more attention devoted to activities than to

structures. The report states, "in most projects....activities have been institutionalized but not partnership structures (Tushnet, 1993).

Concluding Thoughts

If nothing else, the review of the research literature revealed what little formal research has been performed on reform-model, school-business partnerships. Determining the "success" of school-business partnerships requires accurate assessments of their effectiveness--a task not easily performed. The complexities involved in identifying and measuring student outcomes (as indicators of partnership success) pose a daunting reality. Yet there remains the need for future studies which examine the long-term impacts of partnerships on student achievement. Private-public sector collaborations are mushrooming in size and scope. Without credible assessments of these partnerships we will not learn from our mistakes nor recognize the reasons for our successes. Likewise, without thorough evaluations partnerships will continue to fail in their attempts to restructure schools and serve students.

Our construct does not purport to delineate a definitive model for all school-business partnerships to follow, especially one that ensures success. Generalizing these findings (or themes) to any or all school-business relationships would not be prudent; there is simply not enough evidence to support a prescriptive and definitive model which will guarantee success. This summary should, however, offer insights regarding the dynamics and characteristics of partnerships that appear to be effective in instituting fundamental curricular change. Both businesses and schools can learn from the common themes which appeared among the various programs studied.

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